Song Writing

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Songs have always moved me deeply. When I was a teenager I heard Phil Keaggy's song "Let Everything Else Go." Virtually every time I heard that song I would become undone. Even now tears well up in my eyes when I hear:

I can't wait to see Jesus face to face.
Nothing in this world can take your place.
All the pride laid low,
and all his works of gold.
Nothing can compare with what you are.
Let everything else go - I let it go.

The words are simple, yet true, and somehow when they are sung they penetrate my heart deeply, and give expression to my heart in a more focused, moving way. I guess that is what happens in a musical. The two characters talk until their dialogue can no longer contain their emotions. Then they burst into a song, and if it is done well, we respond with tears and applause. Worship songs need to do even more than that. They need to not only reveal our hearts to God, but also move His heart.

I would like to begin our brief discussion of this vast subject by listing a few key assumptions I make (I say "brief" because of the Pacific Worship School in Langley where I taught ing. Even this is just scratching the surface...but it sure is fun scratching).

All creativity comes from God. Genesis 1:26 "Let us make man in our image..." We are creative because we were created by a loving creator. Period. If the universe began with an explosion, there would be no creativity. God invites us to be creative with Him. The only difference is that we cannot make something out of nothing. However, I believe we can, like God, transform chaos into order and art. Recognizing God's creativity will not lead to laziness, but to work that is filled with worship and art that is filled with both passion and God's presence.

We are not all called and gifted to be songwriters. This is something very basic, but it does need saying. Pastors, do not put pressure on your worship leaders to produce songs if that is not their gifting. There are many gifted worship leaders who are not songwriters, or at least not primarily songwriters. My hunch is that around one in every twenty is really called.

We need the courage and the love to tell one another the truth. There are several reasons for this, but the first is that there is so much to be done: the gospel to be preached to those who have never heard; the poor to be clothed and fed; the imprisoned to be visited; the fatherless children cared for; etc. If you are not called to write, take courage, find out what you are called to do and do it! No one else can take your place and you will always feel like you are striving until you are in the center of God's will, doing exactly what you are called to do. Besides, until you do accept your place, one of the other key ministries will be neglected and we will all be weaker as a result.

If someone brings a "bad" song (in other words it is evident that this is not their gifting), it is unkind to bear around the bush with, "That is nice..." Tell them the truth in love and encourage them to find out

what they are made for.

So many of the songs that Vineyard Music Group receives have never gone through the initial screening at the local church level. The result is a waste of valuable time and energy for all concerned.

Many times when songwriters are insecure they will hide behind spiritual words and imply that God is on their side by saying, "God gave me this song." I think it is far better to share the song and have someone else say, "Wow, that really touched me. God must have inspired you to write that!" than for us to speak out of our insecurity. John Barnett, one of my favorite songwriters said this:

Sometimes we want to canonize the songs we write...This is the way God gave it to me and therefore it stands. Do not mess with it; do not change it; do not play with it in any other way.

Let us write and then release the songs and let others decide what God has given to us.

One other reminder here. We do not begin as mature, accomplished songwriters. I am so thankful to all of you for giving me the chance to mature and develop: Andy Park, Gary Best and others saw the potential in me before seeing the finished product. That is what I look for as an equipper - someone with potential, the call and a teachable, humble heart.

Better songs are coming. I do not believe we are done yet. At least I know that I am not. I want to be a student all my days. I know songs with more passion, quality, anointing and truth are coming. You could very well be one of the chosen to write these new songs. So let us not settle and become stagnant. Let us embrace the pioneering spirit once again, without forgetting where we come from.

I would like to divide what is to follow into seven sections. Let me briefly summarize to help you follow where I am going:

- Song vision - what is the one thing you are trying to say
- Form - what structure best fits your song vision
- Melodic Development
- Sources of Inspiration and Types of Songs
- Creative Process
- What to Do with a Completed Song
- Four Qualities of a Worship Standard

Song Vision

First let us look at the area of song vision. This is a phrase that I use to describe the essence of a song. This is like a target: if you do not have one, you will never know if you hit the mark. Many beginning songwriters try to say too many things in one song. But a song is primarily designed to say just one thing and to say one thing with both passion and focus.

In my songwriting class or at a workshop, if I have trouble following a student's lyrics, I will usually ask, "What are you trying to say in this song?" There were about five song visions. One is enough. You should be able to summarize your song vision if a few seconds. If you cannot, you will probably need to make some changes.

Now obviously, there are almost an infinite amount of potential song visions for songs that could be written. What type of song vision are we looking for? One that not only expresses your heart in a real way, but also clearly expresses what the church (both gathered and individuals) long to say to God. Songwriter, teacher and consultant Sheila David, addressing secular songwriters, says this:

A song is successful when an audience responds with a recognition that say's " Me too...I've felt that...I've seen what you're seen...I know what you mean. That's what our applause says: the performer is singing not so much to us as for us.

This is what we could call "Striking the Common Chord." Especially in worship, our vision is to unlock the language of people's hearts and for them to say, "That is exactly what I wanted to say to God." IT is to give the church both musical and lyrical language to describe their feelings and their faith. A little bit further along I will give you some examples of my own - the journey of how a song goes from song vision to a finished song that works.

Form & Style

Now that you what you want to say, the next critical step is determining the form or structure for

a song. Stephen Sondhiem said "content dictates form." This is very true. A song without form is like flesh without a skeleton. It is not just knowing what to say (your song vision), but how to say it (form & style).

Of course we recognize this is true in life, yet we sometimes totally ignore this area in songwriting, much to our detriment. I was a locked-in verse-chorus writer until I started studying both songwriting and the history of songwriting. Whole new worlds began to open up to me.

Let me briefly describe three major song forms:

1. The AAA

The triple is the simplest song form. Many people call it the "one-part song form." There are only verses (though in some church circles they would say there are only "choruses", however, to be consistent wit songwriting terms we will us "verse"). The verses can range in number from one to many (though the most common is three, hence the title).

What is so beautiful and powerful about this song is its simplicity. Musically, once you have heard the first A (usually between 8-16 bars) you have heard it all. These songs are usually easy to remember and sing like, "Isn't He" by John Wimber. That song has two 8 bar "A"s with another two "A"s where you just change the title phrase to "Yes, You are." Singing "Yes, You are" is more intimate, but "Isn't He" is a much better title and titles are important. This song really leads you towards intimacy step by step.

The strength of this form is to focus in a few key melodic phrases and keep repeating it. Do not make the mistake that simplicity is either childish (actually, being childlike is a very good thing) or beneath you. The best writers in the world have a goal of being simple, fresh and direct. The most enduring songs are, virtually without exception, the simple ones. Being simple and bad is very easy...being simple and good is *very* hard.

One of the lost distinctive about the lyrics in a AAA is the key statement, which is many times the title and is found at the end of A (though I should state this about worship songs in general: the title is often the first phrase of the song, primarily because of our church culture surrounded by the use of overheads and the preference of overhead operators).

At this point let me clarify one other term that songwriters use: the "refrain". In the past, the terms chorus and refrain were used interchangeably. In modern language, there is a distinction and I think we should be consistent with terms that songwriters use today. A chorus begins a distinctively new musical section in the verse/chorus form. A refrain is sometimes used to end the AAA verse and resolve. The distinction is that the refrain wraps up something (many times repeating a key phrase) and is not new musically or lyrically. An interesting example of this is Twila Paris' "The Joy of the Lord" from the album *Sanctuary*. The liner notes label the section where it repeats "The joy of the Lord" as a chorus, but that is a classic refrain; nothing new is being said lyrically or musically and its ending is wrapping up the A section. In fact, that song is a classic AABA (but the song exists fine without the B, especially in a congregational setting).

One other option for a refrain I should mention is the outside refrain. The outside refrain may be appropriate when you are in the AAA and you want something more, but the option of chorus or bridge will not work. An outside refrain is a short repeated hook phrase that the song can exist without, but it breathes some fresh life into the song. If you do use it, watch out that you do not add another song vision or remove the simplicity.

Do not forget or overlook the simplicity of this AAA form. Many of our favorite songs, like "I Love You, Lord" are popular and endure because of their simplicity.

2. The AABA

Now let us turn our attention to the AABA, probably at present my favorite song form. I think one of the main reasons I like it so much is because this form is a wonderful blend of repetition and contrast.

In the AAA, it is all repetition; in the verse/chorus you have a back and forth feel. But in the AABA, it seems to have just the right amount of both (however, that is my personal taste and that definitely is a factor when we are discussing songwriting).

So what does AABA sound like? An AABA will usually begin right off the top with the strongest melodic hook (and often lyrical phrase). This will

usually be repeated with a 2nd A (same music, different lyrics) before moving into the contrasting B (commonly referred to as the bridge...though it is different than the bridge in the verse/chorus form so I just call it "B").

Several examples that I can remember clearly are "Memory" from the musical *Cats*, "When I Need You" by Leo Sayer and in a worship song I wrote, "Eternity" (although "Eternity" is very simple lyrically as well as with just one "A"). If you are not sure what I mean, listen to these songs... that is the fun part with learning about songwriting.

One of the key things I do now, when I receive inspiration and focus my song vision, is to decide what form it would best work in. Let me tell you how one of my most recent AABA songs came about.

Last summer, Joyce, the kids and I went to visit Joyce's best friend and family. Their house is near a large embankment that is quite steep, framed by a river running below and a mountain range in the distance. I was standing on the edge by myself, drinking in the beauty of summer, all the green trees, the river, the mountains with jagged gray peaks and the blue sky dotted with white clouds. I exclaimed, "I love the view from here!" As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew a song was born.

Plus, I knew something else about true praise: it is not something we muster up; instead it is an absolutely genuine response to revelation. Real praise comes from seeing something or someone wonderful.

The inspiration was very strong and instinctively I knew the song should be either an AAA or AABA because of the distinctive characteristics of these forms. The key lyrical phrase comes at the of an A, not at the beginning of a chorus. However, getting a strong song vision does not mean the song is written. It just means that you have a target to shoot for.

About three months later, I tried to write the song, but each time it came off real flat. Finally, over one year late, after the both of our twin girls, Joy and Mercy, it began to come together. Even then, I worked at it for hours over a three-week period.

One of the key things I am learning in all of this is patience and knowing that each of the song forms will serve different songs. The key is matching them so they complement each other.

3. The Verse/Chorus

I do not mean to give the verse/chorus song bad rap. A lot of my favorites are written in it. Perhaps it has become overused in contemporary Christian music and the new wave of worship music. What is the key strength of the verse/chorus song?

The dominant characteristics of the verse/chorus song is assertiveness, unlike the unassuming quality of the AAA form, where no one section stands out from one another. A chorus, by its very nature, calls attention to itself. As it interjects its points between the story line of the verses, it seems to say, "Hey listen to me! I have something to say."

The structure is ideal if you want periodically to restate an emphatic message. Now you can see more clearly why what you want to say and how you want to say it is so important. A classic example of this is "If I Ever Lose My Faith in You" by Sting from the album, *Ten Summoner's Tales*. Another is one of my earlier worship songs, "Faithful One" (in fact when I was writing "Faithful One", I did not have the foggiest idea of form. If this is all new to you, do not despair...it was to me too only a short time ago!). Usually a verse/chorus song will be made up of two (or three) verses and a chorus that repeats after each verse. In worship songs you might only have one verse, but many will have two (like "Refiner's Fire" or "Simply Said"). Each song is unique and so there are no unbreakable rules. I am sure glad John Barnett only did one verse in "Holy and Anointed One" because I just love singing "Jesus..."

Usually, the title will be found at the top of the chorus. If possible, that is the strongest place for it, but there are always exceptions. In many worship songs the title will be the first phrase of the song, which can work if it is also a summary phrase (like "Faithful One"); or it could be the last phrase of the chorus (like "The River is Here" or "Stay (Orphans Song)"). Remember, the first line of the song, because of the reality of overheads and titles, should be a phrase that is strong as you can make it for maximum impact. One good way to see if you are using a verse/chorus is to see if the chorus answers the question, "And that is why I say..." Your chorus should contain the primary lyric and melody that you want to repeat.

Let me make one comment about the use of a

bridge in a verse/chorus worship song. Be careful and do not add a bridge unless it is really necessary. A bridge adds another melodic section and some people might not use it because the song is too complex. Brian Thiessen's song "I Give Thanks" works even though the bridge is not that strong and not totally necessary.

If you feel that introducing a bridge complicates the strong, try using a half-verse or a short instrumental break. Of course, there are other forms beyond the main three (and probably new ones to be created), but we do not have the time in this chapter to go into them. Remember this: the proper use of form is your servant, not your master, but it is a very effective servant and should be utilized.

Melodic Development

Let me move into melodic development, an area that is very difficult to cover on paper because it is all you want to hear. I do not believe that composition can be generated by a teacher for a student. The river of music has to just be...it cannot be generated by an instructor, but it can be directed.

For me, both as a lyricist and a composer, I have not had a direct teacher. I try to learn everywhere, every day. Ultimately, the best teacher here will be to listen to great composers.

In a way, melody is somewhat a mystical element in songs, like an inward passion that finds an outward expression in notes. In essence, melody is both a rhythm and a pitch; a succession of musical notes in rhythm that together form a musical whole with a start and a finish. The key building block of a melody is a "motif". A motif is also the key unifying element of a song. Other common terms for a motif is a "hook" or "riff". It is a short figure of unique design that occurs throughout a song as a unifying element. All food songs have a strong motif (I am sure there are exceptions, but not many).

Recently, I have enjoyed the music of Andrew Lloyd Webber because his hooks are son strong: "With One Look" from the musical *Sunset Boulevard* or "Music of the Night" from *Phantom of the Opera*. These melodies "say" exactly what the lyrics state...and that is the goal.

I think Cindy Rethmeier's motifs are very strong ("Exalt the Lord" and "Full of His Glory"). For her, it is all instinct. She is not a professionally trained musician or writer. I have written with her before and I love it because her melodic sense is very strong (plus, more importantly, she is "anointed"; doing what God has called her to do). When you are writing melodically, several different factors will affect what your motifs sound like:

1 Your personality: One of my trademarks is pushing the 1 on 4+ (like each melodic phrase in the A of "I Love the View from Here." I sing the word "hill" and "miles" on beat 4+ instead of beat 1.). Your melodies will sound like you...and they should. This is still a stumbling block to me because of how I see myself (and you thought you were the only one).

2 Song intent: What is your song vision? If you do not know, your melody could wander aimlessly. If the lyric is developing at the same time, what do those words evoke? When I was writing "Father Me", the repeated movement from the 2nd note to the major third has a reaching, longing feel for me. This matched the lyric, "Father Me."

Musical culture and influences will determine your style. Of course, your biggest influence will be the music you fall in love with as a teenager...so pick your influences wisely. For me, I have found now as I have turned 30, I am learning from totally new styles of music that I would never listen to before.

Of course, all this talk about melody presupposes that you have a good basic understanding of music theory and intervals and how these affect melodic development. If not, I encourage you to go to your local community college and take music theory. You might even meet some non-Christians and learn something from them.

Let me make one side comment here. A number of people in workshops or students at the Pacific Worship School are surprised when I use secular examples. This surprises me. We are not an island. God has scattered His gifts throughout the earth and we have much to learn. Just know that if a person is good at something (such as Webber as a composer), does not mean you have them as a model in other things. So the way I live is this: I am totally committed and plugged into a local church, I attend regularly, I am part of a small home group and I am accountable to people who know me, love me and have the courage to rebuke me - but as a songwriter, I learn from everyone. Maybe I do

not follow them spiritually, but I do learn from the musically and lyrically. We must humble ourselves as writers and embrace being a student for life.

Sources of Inspiration

Now let us take a look at sources of inspiration and the types of songs we should be writing. First of all, I do not believe songs come from a vacuum. Instead, they come from a life lived in its fullness and from the Author of Life.

I do not believe our primary method should be to go off somewhere and empty our minds so God can fill them with song ideas. Even though I am a lover of the disciples of silence and solitude, I do not think it is the primary method of writing songs. We are to open up our eyes and ears to the "songs" that are around us.

The first key source for "songs" is Scripture. I am so thankful for the written word of God. I am so thankful for the people that lost their earthly lives so I could read it freely - and I love to sing it. I see two different types of worship songs: one is Scripture inspired and the other is the Scripture put to music. Both are valuable and needed.

1 Scripture inspired - this is when a passage or verse inspires a song. The scripture is used like a springboard ("Cry of My Heart" - Psalm 86:11 by Terry Butler).

2 Scripture song - this is when the scripture is used exactly as is, or with a moderate paraphrase (like one of mine, "Remember Mercy" - Habbakak 3:2, or "Hiding Place" - Psalm 32:7 by Lorale Thiessen).

David Garratt and other writers in New Zealand are writing with the actual reference included, like Romans 16:19 "Be excellent at what is good." Bob Fitts caught on to some of these songs and has introduced them in North America.

Singing Scripture is absolutely one of the best ways to learn and remember it. Even with the availability of Scripture to read, this is still very important. However, remember the two extremes that could render Scripture songs ineffective. If you use the Scripture exactly as is, watch out for a wooden inflexible lyric that states truth, but does not sing it. There is a definite difference between a statement and a lyric. Secondly, be sure not to paraphrase inaccurately and end up saying something that Scripture never intended. Let us write Scripture songs. It is so powerful to sing the Word of God together. WE need more songs like "Spirit of the Sovereign Lord," a wonderful song written by Andy Park.

Another source for song ideas is your own relationship with God. Here the key word is "integrity". It is not what the church expects of me; instead, it is what is real in my life, what I own and what I practice in the secret. The result is songs that not only are genuine, but also strike a chord in the lives of other real people in the church.

Let me give you a personal piece of advice that comes from my life: "Do not write for the church." Instead, write to express your heart to God. It does not matter if the church even sings it. You expressed it to God and that is what counts.

Many of my songs that eventually found their way out were written this way ("Father, I Want You to Hold Me," "Creation Calls," "I Want to Know You," "Stay," "I Love the View from Here"). The bottom line is we need more "real" songs - songs about surrender from where we really live, using real human words and pictures. It can also be easy to hide behind "spiritual catch phrases" and words we say with no revelation. But remember this: Jesus used real earthly human words and he was God.

Another wonderful source for your "songs" is the life of the church. Now, for you to write about the life of your church, you need to be involved in a real way (I touched on this before). If God has called you to do this you will know that as you begin to give musical language to the heart of you congregation. This was the primary way that Andy Park, the original worship pastor of the Langley Vineyard, modeled writing for me.

Let me give you a second piece of personal advice: "Write for the church." Get it? The Christian life is, in many ways, a paradox. Wisdom and maturity is to know when each one applies. You are to write to serve the church and give language to their hearts, not to give yourself a name. Write about what the church needs to express, not simply your "favorite" topic. I am not saying that this is always easy. But this is God's will and is very exciting when you are obedient and it works. For me, "Light the Fire Again" was written with His heart and it has been humbling to see how it is working.

The next source is related: teaching. Whenever you listen to teaching, either from your local church or teachers with a wider sphere of influence, ask the Lord if you should be singing this. This will greatly help in our ability to remember and own the teaching.

I recall clearly the day Gordon Fee came to our church and said, "Let me see your song sheet and I will write your theology." As a writer, I sat there and gulped! At that moment a revelation came so strong about the need to train writers. This was one of the key reasons for me starting the Pacific Worship School (a training and equipping school for songwriters and leaders). I realized that we send our pastors and teachers to school to prepare them to teach the church, usually for two to four years. Yet, most people cannot remember the sermon one-hour after they heard it, but they remember the songs.

Despite the impact and importance of the songs, we offer no training for the writers in both Biblical and spiritual disciplines for the craft of songwriting. This must change. We must partner with the pastors and teachers. We must know both the Word of God *and* our craft.

Let me touch upon a few more sources for songs and types of songs we should be using. Something powerful happens when we sing our prayers, when we intertwine worship and intercession. This is powerful, both in Heaven (Revelation 5:6-14) and on earth. Here it is important to begin in prayer, then sing your prayers, recognize a potential song and then craft your prayer into a song. I think there is a place in gatherings to sing prayers spontaneously, with no intention for being sung over and over again in the same way. Both are good. Some songs that begin in spontaneity could be crafted into a song so it can have a long life.

Another key source for me is revelation and understanding. This happens when God opens your eyes and you being to see a certain truth appear everywhere - it could be that God wants you to write about it.

For me, this is how the entire "Father's House" concept came about. God has been speaking to me about the father issues ever since I was a boy. So when Paul Cain said, "When the Father's love fills the Father's House, the prodigals will come home..." or when I listen to Ed Piorek speak at *The Father Loves You* conference, I can hardly contain myself. My inward passion, revelation and understanding begin to seek expression in melody and lyrics. This type of writing is very fun because it is connected to what you really believe deep inside.

I also wrote "Humble King", a Christmas song, this way. Terry Butler called and asked for a song from me for the Christmas album. I responded, "You have probably asked the wrong guy. I have not written a song in over a year. I think it is over for me." (Of course, none of you artists and writers ever say something like that...) Anyway, I told him "no promises, but I will pray and try..."

Well, then I remembered a specific revelation that stirred me every Christmas. Everywhere I would go I would "see" the same thing. Christmas is all about worship, but not worship of a King who arrives with pomp and an impressive entourage (such as Prince Ali in Aladdin). Christmas is about the worship of a baby, a newborn baby.

Have you ever been at a birth? I have been right there for all five of ours and I am a queasy guy. I am amazed that I did not pass out. It is messy, very humbling, and at first glance not very dignifying. Think about the lyrics in the Christmas carol "Away in a Manger"..."The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes..." Forget it! It smelled, he cried and that dependent, frail baby was our Savior, worthy of worship.

So I wrote out of that revelation which had been brewing in me for several years. Yet, I also wrote in response to a very practical request: "We need a song from you in three weeks time."

Another source and type of song comes from prophetic words. You need to know the purpose and season for the word. Is it one time, or something that has a wider influence and could be sung? II Chronicles 29:30 clearly shows that all of Israel sang the prophetic songs of Asaph the Seer. Singing prophetically over someone, or over the gathered church, can be very effective. Here I am primarily referring to a song that is crafted from a prophetic word. That is how I wrote "Song for the Bride."

Let me say one more thing about types of songs before I move on. We need diversity. All of these types of songs are important. I think one of our key distinctives in the Vineyard is intimacy (interestingly, this was my passion and style even before I knew

the Vineyard movement existed). However, we can, and should, write intimate songs in a variety of styles and from a variety of sources.

Creative Process

What happens when you get a strong song vision and begin writing? What are some of the critical parts of the creative process? One of the first and most important aspects is patience. Do not rush... you do not have to play your new song this Sunday. Let it become a part of you first.

Another is to embrace the reality that songwriting takes time and hard work (okay, it is fun too), but it still requires discipline. Just sitting around waiting for a song to "hit you" will not produce songs that build up the church. Begin to study the craft of songwriting. Now, at the very beginning of a song, let the passion carry you and do not evaluate too soon or you might crush your creativity. The time frame here will vary depending on your personality. I can switch fairly quickly, since I have some of both characteristics - creative, artistic as well as concrete planner.

At the right point, have the courage to ask others to tell you the truth. This is one of my cornerstone values as a writer. I live this. I bounce my emerging songs off people who I respect and I listen to their input. This is also a key value as a teacher and I covenant with my class that I will tell them the truth.

Recently, at a songwriting workshop with 200 people present, I asked the following question: "How many of you feel you have a song that should be recorded, and the only reason it has not is because no one who has "connections" has heard it? Are you willing to play it for me and the whole group here? My response to your song will be this: I will tell you the truth. If it is not strong, I will tell you specifically why. If it is strong, I will recommend it to the record company for use."

Four people raised their hands, sure that they had one. Can you guess what happened? We listened to all four and the response was unanimous. None were ready or strong. This was hard for these four people, but also very helpful.

We can all help each other with this. Let us speak the truth to one another, in love. Of course, in the whole creative process, there also comes a point where you need courage to be yourself, to do it differently than others. Yet, you must still strike a common chord. No one would have recorded my songs if there was not any uniqueness about them. So, when I am listening to student's songs, I am not listening for songs that sound like me, but for songs that sound like them. So invest in your songs, in your heart and take time to own them. Do not just crank them out. Quality and integrity are more important than volume. Invest you rime. Let songs develop over time, even over years if necessary. Be patient. Invest your money by getting proper training in your call and craft. This involves purchasing and listening to albums, buying books on writing and taking courses.

What to do with a Completed Song

So what should you do with a song once it is completed? Well, first of all most songs are not completed. Remember what we have just discussed. In November 1989, John Wimber gathered 35 writers from the Vineyard and had a training session (I was the shy Canadian in the back corner with one song published, wondering, "What am I doing here?"). One thing I will never forget about the meeting was very simple. He told us to rewrite...then rewrite...then rewrite some more. I realized that for the most worship writers who see their call as spiritual (rightly so!), they had a difficulty with this issue, since they would often say, "This is the way God gave it to me!" This demonstrates confusion about the reality of hard work within our spirituality. So I took that counsel and I began to do it! Boy, am I grateful. That piece of advice was priceless.

Back to your completed song. Sing it in the secret place to God. Is that not why we wrote it? If that is all that happens, it has served its primary purpose already in releasing the language of your heart and touching God's heart. Once you have used your song as a personal, private expression to God, wait for the right time to share it in your own home group or as part of your regular song ministry. If there is a positive response in your local setting, share it again in another similar setting. If you find continued fruitfulness when sharing you song, share it with others who may have the opportunity to use it themselves (still on a small scale of distribution). After you receive ongoing encouragement and you

find others besides yourself are singing and using your song, then submit it to a larger distributor of worship music.

Remember, if the song is good, it will work for itself. The best songs find their way into widespread distribution without much effort from the writer.

For me, this was important. Andy Park sent in my first songs to the record company, and then they contacted me, asking for more. I am not saying everyone has to do it exactly this way. It is just one good way and it helps us to keep our hearts in check through this process. I really do believe that all those "personal connections" are sovereignly controlled by God. The harder some people try, the more it slips through their fingers.

One last piece of advice that I received from Andy Park is simple, yet brings life: Pray for, encourage and bless those who are visible. If they have a great "river" song (like Andy's "The River is Here"), use it! Do not try to write a better one in competition. Support each other. Use each other's songs, not just your own. This will release a great blessing of encouragement and unity.

Four Qualities of a Worship Standard

I would like to close with a section of Worship Standards, which describe the common characteristics of songs that are timeless, used everywhere, cross denominational lines, cross musical style lines and get recorded on multiple albums.

1 Universal Song Vision - the essence of this song is something everyone can relate to and many people want to sing it because it is "their" song.

2 A Memorable - a melody that will not let you go, that you can remember and that you love to sing.

3 Simple, yet Unique Lyric - the song says one thing in as few words as possible, in a fresh way, in a way that promotes others to say "that is exactly what I wanted to say, but my heart could not find the words."

4 Anointed - God ordained, the undefinable element that moves us deeply in our spirit and makes us say, "That is God!"

Obviously, not every song you write or sing will be a standard. Most of mine are not. However, this still remains my goal as a worship leader: to choose songs that have these four characteristics. If in the grace of God I write one, I will not know it at the time. It is not the writer who decides.

Remember, we began this journey as songwriters to express out heart, to touch God's heart and to serve the church. In this case, where we began is also our destination because this is all about Him.

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